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100259Z Jan 06

ACTION DRL-00

INFO	LOG-00	ACQ-00	CIAE-00	DODE-00	EAP-00	UTED-00	VCI-00
	TEDE-00	INR-00	L-00	VCIE-00	NSAE-00	ISN-00	NSCE-00
	OES-00	OMB-00	PA-00	PM-00	PRS-00	P-00	ISNE-00
	SP-00	SS-00	TRSE-00	T-00	IIP-00	PMB-00	G-00
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FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0211  
INFO AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY  
ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE  
AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY

UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000029

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [SOCI](#) [PHUM](#) [VM](#) [RELFREE](#) [HUMANR](#) [ETMIN](#)  
SUBJECT: DAK LAK: ENCOURAGING SIGNS ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM  
IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

REF: A) HCMC 1338 B) HCMC 1310 C) HCMC 968 D) 04 HCMC 1491

1. (SBU) Summary: The atmosphere for religious freedom in the hitherto intransigent Central Highlands province of Dak Lak appeared much improved during a ConGen visit in early January. In contrast to past visits, provincial officials told us that they now are prepared to implement Vietnam's legal framework on religion for the province's 100,000-strong Protestant community and detailed some initial positive steps, including church registrations and recognition. Provincial officials remain deeply concerned, however, over the spread of ethnic minority separatism. Protestant leaders from both the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam and a local house church confirmed that conditions have improved markedly for many Protestants in the province, although significant problems remain, particularly in communities that participated most actively in anti-government protests in 2004 and 2001. Change likely would not have been possible without the replacement of the hardline Dak Lak Party Secretary during the province's December Provincial Party Congress. End Summary.

2. (SBU) During a visit to the Central Highlands province of Dak Lak January 4-5, PolOff met with government and religious leaders to reassess religious freedom conditions. Atmospherics and substance had improved since our past visits in September 2005 and November 2004 (refs C and D). In a surprisingly frank and friendly exchange, Ngo Luc, Standing Vice Chairman of the Dak Lak Committee for Religious Affairs said that the province now is committed to work "step by step" to implement Vietnam's legal framework on religion. In the case of the province's 160,000 Catholics, Luc stressed that the local diocese had ordained nine priests, while the province had facilitated another 13 candidates to enter the seminary. Similarly, Dak Lak is working to normalize the situation for the province's 100,000 Protestants. According to the CRA, 90 percent of the Protestant community in the province is affiliated with the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam, the rest with various house churches.

3. (SBU) Luc emphasized that the province facilitated the operation of 191 SECV-linked "meeting points" or house churches during Christmas. The CRA also was in the process of recognizing three new SECV churches, a process that should be completed by the end of February. The province has or soon will provide land and facilitate building permits for the five already-recognized SECV churches in the province. Dak Lak also has allowed the SECV to run a training class for 35 new pastors; the CRA is considering running a second class in 2006. The Province also approved the registration of 19 SECV "meeting points" in three districts in the province. Another seven meeting points might also be registered shortly. Once these meeting points have a proven track record of operating "safely and securely," they will be eligible for recognition. Additional meetings points in those districts will be allowed to operate as legal "sub-churches" of the 19 new meeting points.

4. (SBU) Luc stated that the province's policy of step-by-step registration and recognition also applies to house church groups operating in the province. Those that have "stable operations" will have their registration applications approved, but in the interim, they have been allowed to operate freely. He noted that the habit of house churchgoers to change their affiliation from one denomination to another complicated the province's ability to register house churches.

The Specter of Dega Separatism

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15. (SBU) The CRA official acknowledged that legalization of the activities of the Protestant community has been slow, but said that Protestantism, with its many denominations, is more "complicated." So to, was the history of Protestantism in the Central Highlands, as it has become intermixed with the ethnic minority separatism, a subject of deep concern for provincial leadership. Before Protestantism can be normalized in the province, "political aspects" must be removed so that it is a "pure religion."

The SECV: Hopeful for the First Time  
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16. (SBU) Pastor Y Ky Eban, Dak Lak representative on the SECV National Executive Board and two other pastors from the Dak Lak SECV Provincial Committee told us that they were "very happy" with progress in the province over the past few months. Dialogue with national and provincial government officials is improved. They confirmed the impending recognition of three new churches, the registration of the 19 meeting points and the ongoing training class for pastors. Once ordained, these pastors will be assigned to the newly-registered meeting points so that the congregations can begin internal SECV and GVN procedures for full recognition.

17. (SBU) The SECV leaders said that significant problems remain. For example, while the government allowed 191 meeting points to operate at Christmas, another 109 in dozens of villages remained closed. According to Eban, these villages participated in the April 2004 protests "against the GVN." Asked to be more specific, Eban said that individuals "linked to FULRO" told worshippers that the protests would lead to return of their lands, additional financial support and migration to the United States. Protest organizers also said that, ultimately, there would be an independent Dega state with a separate "Dega Protestantism" in the Central Highlands. (FULRO was the armed anti-GVN ethnic minority insurgency that operated in the Central Highlands from 1975 to 1992.)

18. (SBU) Eban said that the challenge for the SECV was how to work to bring the believers influenced by the Dega activists back to "normal religious activities." On this score, the SECV urged the provincial government to allow all 300 meeting points in the province to operate over Christmas, but it refused. According to Eban, Ea Sup district (which we had visited the previous day) is the most difficult locality in Dak Lak. Not only are no SECV meeting points operating, but the district government also did not allow any candidates to attend the pastoral training class. They noted that Ea Sup was one of the key centers of anti-GVN protest in 2004 and 2001.

United World Mission Church  
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19. (SBU) On January 5 we also met in private with lay preacher Diep Tan Chau, provincial representative of the United World Mission Church (a house church organization based in Danang), at his home some 30 kilometers from the provincial capital of Buon Ma Thuot. Chau told us that conditions have improved for the church's 400 members and six house churches. Members are principally ethnic Bru and Van Kieu. None participated in the 2004 or 2001 protests, according to Chau. Another 200 members recently broke away from the United World Mission Church and affiliated themselves with the Presbyterian Church.

110. (SBU) Chau said that in December 2005 he submitted the paperwork with the provincial CRA to begin the registration process for the church in the province. In preparation for registration, he also has had a number of interviews with district and provincial CRA and police officials.

111. (SBU) Although the church's relationship with senior levels of provincial government has improved, Chau complained that local implementation of the legal framework on religion is inconsistent. For example, some local officials have said that the legal framework applies only to registered churches and therefore, United World Mission Church members can only worship at home. Police continue to order the church members not to gather for services -- including for Christmas. However, when pastors ignore the instructions, there is no retribution. However, some followers are intimidated and have abandoned the church. In another incident in December, local police seized a bible, hymnal and collection box from one United World Mission house church, although other operations of the same house church were unaffected. District CRA officials have promised to intervene, but Chau was not overly optimistic.

112. (SBU) Comment: The mere fact that government leaders now tell us that the province has at least 100,000 Protestants and a significant house church community is a sea change from November 2004, when they said straight-faced that the province only recognized 5,000 Protestants. While provincial leaders remain highly -- perhaps overly -- concerned over ethnic minority separatism, they now appear more willing to provide the

Protestant community there with alternatives to "Dega Protestantism." This change of approach is significant as, from their perspective caution is paramount. Dak Lak was the heart and soul of the FULRO movement and reportedly produced its toughest and most determined fighters.

113. (SBU) Although Dak Lak is far behind other Central Highlands provinces in easing restrictions on religious freedom, this visit leaves us more hopeful that concrete progress is achievable. One key factor in catalyzing change was the shift in local leadership. In the recent Provincial Party Congress Dak Lak's ultra hardline Party Secretary was replaced. According to provincial officials, the new Party Secretary is much more moderate. Similarly, his new Deputy is the former Provincial Chief of Public Security, who in past meetings, struck us as tough, but open-minded. End Comment.  
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